

Presentation of the Sustainable Tourism Workshop group at the:

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Abstract:

The Gozo landscape refers primarily to the rural landscape of countryside and coast. It also refers to the urban landscape of Gozo's historic village cores. The Sustainable Tourism Workshop group reflected on the role of the landscape in Gozo's tourism, with an emphasis on how Gozo tourism can be made more sustainable. This paper is the outcome of the group's discussion. A mixed composition of the group, with academics and students, foreigners and Maltese, brought different views and ideas about the subject. The group's focus on the rural environment provided useful insights on Gozo's tourism which informs policy formulation and future research.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism, Gozo, rural landscape, historic villages

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Rural landscape and tourism:

A proposed policy for sustainable tourism in Gozo

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Introduction

Gozo is the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago. It has a land area of 67 square kilometres and a population of just 31,000 and a transient population of domestic and international visitors numbering over 700,000 per year¹. Tourism is an important source of income and employment and remains one of the major contributors to the Gozo economy. This affects various other sectors including the retail and wholesale, public transport, education, and the accommodation and food sector.² Tourism-related expenditure in Gozo amounts to up to 50 per cent of its GDP and generates up to 20 per of its employment. In 2014 expenditure in Gozo-related tourism was estimated at €180 million.³

Gozo tourism is heavily reliant on domestic tourists (400,000 domestic tourists/visitors annually)⁴ and on day-trips of international tourists. In addition, there are international stay-over tourists who spend most of their visit on Gozo. Increasingly, Gozo is attractive to foreign residents – senior and middle-aged, not only as a place for retirement but also in view of its tranquil and quaint characteristics.

Gozo is subject to what is known as ‘double insularity’, since it is on the periphery of another small island. This makes it heavily dependent on the ferry service with mainland Malta, leading to a number of problems, including relatively high transport costs. This problem affects tourism in Gozo, since all tourist traffic passes through Malta.⁵ The added effort to get to Gozo from Malta’s sole international airport is a disincentive for international tourists to stay overnight in Gozo.

The island of Gozo is characterised by a single major settlement at the centre (namely Rabat/Fontana/ Munxar) and a number of smaller urban settlements across the island. Some of the settlements are located on high ground (namely Zebbug, Xaghra, Nadur, Qala), providing opportunities for scenic views of the countryside. At the west end of the island, settlements are located in plains or valleys, and are surrounded by gentle hills (namely Gharb, Ghasri, San Lawrenz),

¹ National Statistics Office. (2013). Demographic review 2013. Available from. https://nso.gov.mt/en/publicatons/Publications_by_Unit/Documents/C5_Population%20and%20Migration%20Statistics/Demographic_Review_2013.pdf Last Accessed 17.04.18.

² Integrated Territorial Development Strategy: for Gozo 2017-2020: Public Consultation (2017) P. S. for European Funds and Social Dialogue, Ministry for Gozo https://meae.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MEAE/PublishingImages/Pages/Consultations/PublicConsultationonanIntegratedTerritorialDevelopmentStrategyforGozo2017-2020/Gozo%20Strategy_FINAL.pdf

³ Borg, D. (2017). The development of cultural heritage in Gozo and its potential as a tourism niche. *International Journal of Tourism Cities*. 3 (2), pp. 184-195

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Briguglio, L. (2009). Sustainable tourism on the small island of Gozo. *The Gozo Observer*, 20, 3-14.

giving idyllic scenic views of small traditional villages surrounded by greenery.⁶ The west is the area where the countryside has been least subject to interventions.

Gozo countryside provides tourists with an opportunity to escape from the daily routine to a quiet, peaceful and green ambience. There is ample scope for countryside walks and other activities involving the enjoyment of the countryside. In spite its small size, Gozo offers a diversity of places to visit with the most popular and heavily frequented including the Citadel, the historic village core in Rabat, various old villages across the island, Ta' Pinu Church and Sanctuary, the prehistoric temple of Ggantija (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and the nature park at Dwejra.

Issues for discussion

The history of urban development is inextricably linked with the natural landscape and its transformations. From the very beginning, this process has had a dualistic character. People have been constantly striving to subjugate nature and, on the other hand, they have been trying to protect it⁷. In recent times, the dynamics of spatial and functional transformation have led to many adverse phenomena in most tourism destination and this includes also in rural areas. The landscape, especially the fragile natural zones, are constantly changing, and although change itself is an unavoidable part of the natural process, its current scale and dynamics are a cause for concern. It is important to guide change so that it will ensure socio-economic development without disturbing natural processes, landscapes and all aspects related to the identity of a given region⁸.

The concept of sustainable tourism is particularly meaningful and relevant to destinations which have significant rural areas, such as Gozo. This is because in such cases tourism, and of course, economic growth, mostly depends on the natural value of a given space. Therefore there is the need to take care about and think more of the natural environment and all aspects of landscape, while creating and implementing planning policies and strategies. In other rural-based tourism destinations, the transition process from agriculture to a mix of agriculture and tourism functions has received increased attention over the last 20 to 30 years. Reduced incomes from agricultural activity has acted as a catalyst to this transition to the agriculture/tourism mix.

However, it is important that any change is introduced with caution and in a manner that will neutralise conflicts in the human-environmental system. Moreover it needs to guarantee adequate protection of nature and landscape, and provide opportunities for development, while preserving what is valuable. Sustainable tourism in rural zones should:

- be an important element of the concept of the multi-functionality of rural areas;
- be one of the tools for the development of the non-agricultural function of rural areas;
- create development factors based on a strong and diverse human and social capital;

⁶ Ebejer, J. (2005). Developing the Gozo tourism product - a strategic approach. In L. Buhmann, K. Beck-Koh (eds.), Landscape architecture proposals for Gozo Island. Anhalt University of Applied Sciences: Bernburg.

⁷ McWethy D., Whitlock C., Wilmschurst J., McGlone M., Fromont M., Li X., Dieffenbacher-Krall A., Hobbs W., Fritz S. and Cook E. "Rapid landscape transformation in South Island, New Zealand, following initial Polynesian settlement" (2010). Papers in the Earth and Atmospheric Sciences. 311.

⁸ Martine G., de Estudos N. (2011). Preparing for sustainable urban growth in developing areas. [w:] Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division. Population Distribution, Urbanization, Internal Migration and Development: An International Perspective. United Nations publication. Europe. s. 7.

- be an element contributing to the preservation of the cultural and natural heritage of rural areas and the protection of their biodiversity⁹.

Natural heritage plays a central role in rural sustainable tourism. This includes natural assets as well as landscape. These features determine to a large extent whether tourists want to visit a given place, and thus contribute to the economic growth of a given area. Cultural heritage is another important element. In a broader sense, it has a strong link with cultural tourism. Visitors increasingly want to witness unique, unusual features and events that are characteristic of the area. This desire can be only satisfied by well-implemented kind of tourism. Gozo is fortunate in this respect in that it has a wide variety of both natural and cultural assets. It is a unique region with beautiful coastal landscape and many historical objects.

Methodology

Sustainable tourism to Gozo is dependent on leisure activities in which tourists can engage in. The Sustainable Tourism working group set out to reply to two questions namely: What is required for sustainability of tourism in Gozo? Is there a link between landscape and sustainable tourism?

The bulk of the work was carried out over two days by the group. In the first day, the group went for a walk in the countryside starting from Ta' Saraflu and ending in Dwejra. As far as was possible, the group wanted to replicate the experience of a 'normal' tourist group on a Gozo countryside walk. For this reason the group was accompanied by a tour guide. Thanks to the guide the tour participants were able to learn about the archaeology, the flora, the geology, the landscape and the human activities in the area. The group also walked through the historic streets of Rabat. Both walks provided useful insights on the tourist experience and served as a good basis for the discussion. The group also visited the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin of Ta' Pinu and the main square of the village of Għasri.



⁹ Kupidura A., Łuczewski M., Kupidura P. (2012). Wartość krajobrazu. Rozwój przestrzeni obszarów wiejskich. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN. Warszawa. s. 14-17

On the second day the group discussed issues relating to sustainable tourism in Gozo and also prepared a presentation that was delivered to all participants on the last day of the Le NOTRE forum.

In the weeks prior to the group activities, the moderators sourced and distributed readings for members to familiarise themselves with the issues relating to Gozo and also those relating to sustainable tourism. In the preparation of this article, more readings were sourced. These were the basis for further online discussions between the authors.

Findings and Recommendations

The following is a resume of the discussion. An important caveat is that most was based on the participants' knowledge of Gozo, which for some was limited. This made the information and knowledge gained from the experience of the excursion all the more important. The value of these insights lies in that a visitor's short-stay impressions are intertwined with the knowledge of architecture and spatial planning students and academics. The following are the group's main findings and recommendations.

Reflecting on the excursion, the group recognised how having information on what one is seeing will greatly enhance the experience. The experience of the countryside walk would have been different and greatly diminished had the group walked the same route without having the information provided by the guide. The shared information also made it more an educational experience especially for those amongst the group with an interest in nature who were able to appreciate the area's endemic ecology. This highlights the strength Gozo possesses for nature tourism which however needs to remain of a low impact.

The group considered that more sustainable tourism can be achieved if information is made available to tourists where and when appropriate. One way of doing this is having a tour guide, but, given the more independent nature of tourism today, there are other media that can be used, such as on-site information panels and apps with on-site QR codes. Interestingly, both the Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) and private operators designed and promote a series of walks both in Malta and in Gozo. Small and lightweight booklets as well as website content provide information on such walks. However, the experience of the working group participants demonstrates the need of on-site access to information, contributing to a greater appreciation of the destination.



The group also discussed how connectivity facilitates sustainability in tourism. This is necessary both at the micro level within villages and towns and at the macro scale, connecting different towns. At the macro level, better and more frequent public transport services are required between towns and villages. Better and more reliable public transport will encourage Gozitans, Maltese visitors and tourists to make more use of public transport and less use of private transport, making transport on Gozo more sustainable. At the micro level, easier access within towns requires better and wider pavements. The pedestrian should be given greater priority, especially in the centres of towns and villages, even if this takes away space for roads and vehicle parking. Connectivity within towns goes beyond merely providing the footpaths. It involves creating a more pleasant and safer environment for walking, and also cycling.

At this point, the group discussion moved on to the quality of urban spaces in the historic streets of Rabat. On the previous day's walk in Rabat, group members were impressed by the charm and the character of its historic streets, but were greatly disappointed with some inappropriate modern intrusions. In particular, the historic urban landscape quality of the main square, Pjazza San Gorg, is severely undermined due to the presence of plastic canopies over tables and chairs. Pjazza San Gorg is a quaint enclosed piazza at the heart of a network of narrow historic roads and dominated by the imposing façade of the church. The tarnishing of historic landscape qualities is, in the view of the group, significantly detrimental to tourism, because what could potentially be a phenomenal urban space in a historic core has been turned into an open air restaurant, enclosed by plastic paraphernalia.



A non-Maltese member of the group noted that the walk in historic Rabat was an opportunity to get a glimpse of the daily lives of local people. People's lives and the local culture is also reflected to some extent in the architectural features of the historic facades including doors, windows, balconies, name plates, potted plants and other features.¹⁰ Another non-Maltese participant noted how she

¹⁰ Ebejer, J. (2015). Tourist experiences of urban historic areas Valletta as a case study (Doctoral thesis). University of Westminster.

had been to an event two days previously at Villa Rundle gardens and there she had the opportunity to interact with local people in a fun and relaxing atmosphere. In the group discussion, the need for local-tourist interaction was highlighted as a means for promoting sustainability. Local events with the attendance of tourists is one means for achieving this. Another is by having tourists staying in shared accommodation where the tourist can interact with the locals and experience their way of life first hand.

The group discussion then evolved from tourist 'connection' with people to tourist 'connection' with place. For example in the countryside walk to Dwejra, the walkers were able to 'connect' with the rural landscape by learning about the nature, the geology, the ecology and the marine environment, while seeing and directly experiencing them. The cold winds on the exposed coastal footpaths heightened the experience. Connecting with place, greatly enhances the overall tourist experience.

The group discussion then turned to EcoGozo. A consultation document¹¹ describes the vision as follows:

"Gozo will become an eco-island by 2020, supported by a keen and committed sustainable community. We want to see quality of life in Gozo improving further through education, economic development and social progress. Gozo will strive to reduce its carbon and water footprints. We want to protect the Gozitan lifestyle, the island's environment, resources, culture and identity, and see that all these play a significant part in attracting more visitors and investors to the island."

During the conference, a representative of the Gozo Ministry spoke about EcoGozo and explained various projects and initiatives that are being carried out by the Ministry. Each initiative is commendable in its own right, but the Sustainable Tourism group felt that there is a mismatch between the work being carried out and the declared vision. EcoGozo projects seemed peripheral to the overall government policy for Gozo.

The principle of sustainability has been fused into Malta's tourism policies. However there still remains an implementation gap. This is the case for the island of Malta, primarily, but also for the island of Gozo. Adopting Gozo as an eco-island was a step forward towards achieving sustainability. However, in spite of all the eco-Gozo initiatives, the principle of sustainability is not always applied and evident.

The group believes that EcoGozo should be at the centre of public policy for Gozo and this necessitates a long term strategy, clearly defined objectives and means of implementation. The EcoGozo strategy needs to be integrated into other sectors of Gozo's economic and social life, and this should be in practice, and not just on paper.

Gozo's main attractions are its rural and coastal landscapes, and the urban landscapes in the historic town and village cores. A holistic EcoGozo policy should undoubtedly give priority to these. Apart from the environmental and social benefits, an effective EcoGozo policy would be greatly beneficial for tourism and for Gozo's economy.

¹¹ Ministry for Gozo (2012) A vision for an eco-island: EcoGozo. Available at: [file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/A%20Vision%20for%20an%20Eco-Island_Ministry%20for%20Gozo_August%202013_low%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/A%20Vision%20for%20an%20Eco-Island_Ministry%20for%20Gozo_August%202013_low%20(1).pdf) (accessed 20 March 2018)

It is the group's view that the main strands of an EcoGozo policy would include:

- Protection, and where possible improvement, of the rural landscape.
- Urban spaces within villages and towns that are more pedestrian friendly, including wider pedestrian pavements, traffic calming and, where possible, pedestrianised streets.
- Continued protection of the historic town and village cores against inappropriate developments.
- More sustainable forms of transport. This includes creating public spaces that are more amenable for walking and cycling. It also includes encouragement of the Gozitan public and Maltese visitors to use public transport.

The Sustainable Tourism group also recommends more efforts to make the general public more aware of the EcoGozo policy and the benefits that this could derive to them and to Gozo.

Conclusion

The Gozo landscape refers primarily to the rural landscape of countryside and coast. It also refers to the urban landscape of Gozo's historic village cores. The group reflected on the role of the landscape in Gozo's tourism, with an emphasis on how Gozo tourism can be made more sustainable.

A mixed composition of the group, with academics and students, foreigners and Maltese, brought different views and ideas about the subject.

Because of limited time and resources it was not possible to reflect on other aspects of sustainable tourism in Gozo, like for example the effect of development pressures on tourism and the role of tourism resorts of Marsalforn and Xlendi on sustainability. It is felt however that the group's focus on the rural environment provided useful insights on Gozo's tourism which, we hope, informs policy formulation and future research.

Apart from the co-authors of this article, the other participants of the Sustainable Tourism working group were: Mark Cassar, Chiara Falcone, Wiesława Gadomska, Imperia Galea, Katharina Maihoefer. The tour guide was Simon Sultana Harkins.